

interviewer may not be as far from that of the participant observer as the separation of chapters in this book might suggest. Through a “participant self,” the interviewer can be in something of an authentic relationship with another person. The interviewer learns to hear new language forms, some of which is language that is intrinsic to the interview situation and some of which is language drifting in from remembrances of other lived experiences. The researcher also uses the goals of the project to inform decisions about what to ask and how to respond and when to listen; through this “observational self,” the researcher can be in more of a theoretic relationship with the spoken discourse.

Exercises

1. Conduct an interview with one of the participants in your study. Then, write a *reflective analysis* in which you address these questions:
 - What kind of interview was it (ethnographic, informant, respondent, narrative, focus group)—and why did you choose this approach?
 - How did the following factors affect the interview—the time, setting, and method of recording apparatus; your rapport with the interviewee; the way you introduced yourself; and the goals of your study?
 - What aspects of the dialogue or the entire interview event were particularly interesting?
 - What do you wish you had done differently?
2. It can be illuminating to read the transcript (or listen to the tape) of an interview and critique one’s performance as an interviewer. Questions that might be useful in carrying out this critique—with the goal of improving your interviews in the future—include the following:
 - How would you characterize your style? Active or passive? Affirming or skeptical? Open or guarded? And so on.
 - Did you encourage the participant to expand on his or her ideas, stories, and accounts?
 - Were there points when a follow-up question should have been asked but wasn’t?
 - Did you allow the interviewee a chance to finish what she or he was saying?
 - How did you respond to any interest the participant showed in you?

7

Producing Data III

Analyzing Material Culture and Documents

Introduction

This chapter introduces you to the study of material culture and documents in qualitative communication research. According to Hodder (2000), material culture and documents are “mute evidence,” because, unlike the speaking subjects we engage in interviews and observational contexts, they are unable to respond directly to the researcher’s questioning. Moreover, people are “curiously inarticulate” (p. 703) when it comes to their reasons for acquiring or handling material things, and they are probably only somewhat more articulate about why and how they read documents. These statements are certainly true, yet texts, objects, and spaces do have a lot to “say” when we read them alongside the living voices of informants and other social actors. Moreover, people do disclose their understandings of, and feelings about, the material world in other ways besides introspection—for example, by gesture, posture, facial expression, stories and accounts, jokes, ironic asides, confessions, even silence.

The resourceful qualitative researcher must be ready to pay close attention to all of the ways in which people interact with things and texts. Some of the most important aspects of culture and communication remain beyond our grasp unless we can gather evidence of how the material world evokes meaning (Mehan, 2001; Schudson, 1989). The characteristic actions of this methodology are *collecting*, *reading*, and *interpreting*. We collect specimens of material objects and documents (or make verbal/visual/aural

representations of these specimens); we read their surfaces and characterize them in great detail; and we interpret them in light of theory, history, and other contextual evidence. In the first section of this chapter, the study of material culture—spaces, objects, and affordances—will be presented, along with exemplars of how it is done from a communication perspective. In the second section, we examine the role of documents in fieldwork, again with examples that illustrate its application.

Material Culture

Things move. Through the course of their natural history they are fabricated, adapted, bought, sold, traded, stolen and given as gifts, perceived as relics, “performed” as elements of ritual, manipulated in the negotiation of personal relationships, and presented in constantly evolving forms as symbols of locally and/or globally significant statuses. Objects “behave” (and “misbehave”) as instruments implicated in processes of interaction. They change as time or activity alters them, or as those using them come, by convention or inclination, to reinterpret and “see” them differently. . . . In the process, the things with which we surround ourselves may, and commonly do, become inscribed with multiple valences of significance, with each level of meaning modifying the other. (Musello, 1992, p. 37)

Material culture has been defined as “any humanly produced artifact” (Tilley, 2001, p. 258); “the corporeal, tangible object constructed by humans” (O’Toole & Were, 2008, p. 617); and “the material manifestations of the social realities understood to be relevant and powerful” (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993, pp. 77–78). As suggested by Christopher Musello in the earlier passage, material culture exhibits a complex duality of being. On the one hand, “things” owe their existence to a human source (and even if they don’t, they are shaped or altered by human activity—as in the rose stems that one cuts for aesthetic effect, or the autumn leaves that get raked into piles for discarding or composting). Afterward, they are bought, sold, collected, displayed, played with, worked upon, and otherwise manipulated for specifically human purposes. Indeed, our species is sometimes referred to as *homo faber* (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993, p. 127), signifying that human beings are always about the business of making things, and by so doing, they maintain a degree of dominion over the material world.

On the other hand, objects are not just passive, malleable “clay” in the hands of *homo faber*. They also possess a degree of agency. Without waxing too anthropomorphic, it is fair to say that objects make their influence felt just as soon as they appear. This can happen in a number of ways. The

artifact may be an objectification of a human belief, desire, or conflict; it may give a material, sensuous form to something that would otherwise be ineffable and hard to put into words. It often disrupts existing patterns of communication, forces new definitions of acceptable usage, or finds new, unexpected ways of colonizing the private and public spheres of its human host. For example, in his classic essay, “Do Artifacts Have Politics?” Langdon Winner (1980) argues that not only are technological artifacts partly the outcome of bureaucratic and interest group politics, they alter the economic, transportation, and communication contours of the geographic areas in which they are located for many years or decades. Objects also have the power, mostly by virtue of their material constancy, to reconnect people with the traditions and myths of their distant past or to serve as sensemaking devices for future generations. They can even spur the formation of a “brand community”—that is, loosely coupled groupings of people whose devotion to a branded product resembles the deep mutual regard of a face-to-face community (e.g., Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

To summarize, the introduction of a material object makes a difference in the existing social order, albeit with the (often unwitting) complicity of the people who adopt, care for, tell stories about, and otherwise incorporate the object into their lives. This duality of being—objects as both things that are acted upon and things that act upon us—conveys a sense of what it means to study the dynamic “lives” of objects.

Material Culture in Qualitative Research

The study of material culture has a long history (Tilley, Keane, Kuchler, Rowlands, & Spyer, 2006). Nearly all of the human sciences are interested to some degree in material culture, and a few of them have made it an emphasized area of study. In archaeology, excavated artifacts and dwellings are typically the only residues of a vanished society, and they therefore become critical evidence for reconstructing a whole way of life. Social anthropologists consider material culture to be important data for a variety of knowledge needs: as the tangible infrastructure of a group’s economic system and political organization; as signs of social codes and hierarchies; as essential elements of ritual (such as gift exchanges); and as concrete manifestations of a group’s mythology and spiritual order. Some of anthropology’s key figures, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1983) and Mary Douglas (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979), have made important theoretical contributions to the way we think of material culture. Recently, anthropologists have shifted their attention away from the study of place-bound societies and toward the worldwide production, circulation, and valuing practices of

commodities, especially in the context of accelerating currents of globalization. Material culture is all but synonymous with the interdisciplinary field of folklore studies. Folklorists study, and sometimes act as “collectors” of, the indigenous arts, crafts, tools, and built environments of subcultures. Sociology divides most of this turf between symbolic interactionists who study objects as significant symbols in social interaction and poststructuralist scholars for whom material culture is a complex terrain of power relations and status distinctions. The field of consumer behavior, a recent entrant in this area, has produced a great deal of intriguing qualitative research on the practices and narratives of consumption.

Communication is also a latecomer to the study of material culture. Part of this past neglect may be due to the tendency of communication researchers to regard objects and the built environment as a mere backdrop or “staging area” for speech acts. It may also be due to the perceived nature of objects. Qualitative communication researchers are typically drawn to questions about the dynamic action and meanings of verbal and behavioral signs, and while material culture may be “expressive,” it cannot formulate a complex idea in the same ways as spoken language. Moreover, the objects, artifacts, and places of material culture may appear to some as too unchanging, too uneventful, and lacking in intentionality. Architecture, for example, tends to escape the gaze of communication researchers (but not architects, environmental psychologists, anthropologists, and other social scientists) because it doesn’t seem relevant to a process view of communication (Jackson, 2006). However, this may be the wrong way to think about material culture and what its role is in communication. Returning again to Musello (1992),

As the owners of things, we often cherish them most because we see them as stable and orienting features of our environments. As scholars, we are also commonly drawn to study material culture as that which survives the most elusive and ephemeral phenomena of human action and experience. We aim to “read” the surfaces and fixed features of objects as enduring articulations of and about that experience. . . . [O]bjects are seen in this view not “as” communication, but as elements “in” communication.

In other words, we look to a material object not as the entity that communicates but as an element—a resource, a referent, a nonverbal sign—in the process of communication. This way of regarding material culture doesn’t reduce its stature in the grand scheme of things; in fact, it inspires great appreciation for the profound and often mysterious ways in which material things become meaningful in our lives. With the upsurge of interest in ethnography and qualitative methods that occurred in the 1980s and

afterward (see Chapter 1) came a rising interest in studying forms of materiality as elements “in” communication. Here is a sampling of topics in communication that have been the focus of material culture studies:

- The location, accommodation, and usage of *media in domestic spaces*—including television as an artifact in the family system (e.g., Shklovski & Mainwaring, 2005; Ureta, 2006) and media artifacts in the lives of adolescents (Brown, Dykers, Steele, & White, 1994)
- The circulation and social adaptation of *media technologies in public spaces*—including mobile media devices (Barendregt, 2008; Bull, 2005)
- The selection, display, and interpretation of *exhibits in museums*—including such issues as the preservation of cultural memory, the politics of historical representation, and the negotiation of contested imagery (Leonard, 2007; Noy, 2008; Perrin, 2002; Taylor, 1997a)
- The construction and reading of *public art and texts*—including street art (Schachter, 2008) and graffiti (Rodriguez & Clair, 1999)
- The creation, arrangement, and interpretation of *personal “rhetorical artifacts”*—including scrapbooks (Katriel & Farrell, 1991) and home-produced photography (Chalfen, 1998; Musello, 1980)
- The expressive qualities and identity work of *artifacts and built environments in subcultures*—including immigrant communities (Lull & Wallis, 1992; Shankar, 2006) and urban youth culture (Simpson, 2000)

Despite its importance in these and other areas of social life, material culture often goes unnoticed or devalued by social actors—and, to some degree, by researchers as well. The next section examines the reasons for this “invisibility” of places and things and presents strategies for making them more visible and useful as data.

Making Material Culture Visible

Why do we so seldom think of “material culture” in all of its manifestations—objects, artifacts, goods, affordances, spaces, and places—when we think of what is most important to us as human beings? Maybe it is because inanimate things don’t tell us we are loved or otherwise express affection and concern for us as individuals. There may be other reasons rooted in human history and our ongoing relationships with the material world. First, a strain of *antimateriality* characterizes diverse schools of thought from antiquity to the present day. From the belief in transcendence of the body in Christianity, Buddhism, and other wisdom traditions, to the elevation of rationality in Enlightenment philosophy, to more recent critiques of “materialistic” values and unbridled consumerism in capitalist societies, the theme of the body and

other material objects as having a nonessential, impure, vulgar, or even false status has been pervasive. Miller (2008) argues that today, "the same antipathy to materiality is evident across a range of ideological and practical forms that continue to define both humanity and its higher (the word is very deliberate) pursuits in direct opposition to the vulgarity of the material" (p. 272).

This antipathy is not applied across the board. Patriotic displays, holy relics, state museums, and historical shrines, for example, are obviously accorded respect as embodiments of abstract ideals. Rather, antimaterialist antipathy has more to do with the idea that the "higher pursuits" themselves—morality, spirituality, the life of the mind, etc.—do not depend on the provision of material forms. For example, certain structures and props are designed to aid educators and learners in their interactions with each other, but the process of education is usually not defined in terms of the material. Likewise, it is difficult to think of any religion existing in the absence of certain iconic objects, yet most believers would be loath to admit that material items are absolutely necessary for practicing their faith. In addition, people are generally comfortable with the idea that commodities and other objects serve their self-defined interests. For example, we may keep certain security objects close by—a favorite pillow, a stuffed animal from childhood—because they acceptably meet a need. People are generally less comfortable with the idea that their interests are defined by what they consume or that objects help create the need for security.

Second, social actors often overlook material culture because it surrounds them all of the time. We live in a familiar milieu of places and artifacts—rooms, furniture, appliances, collectibles, clothing, food, automobiles, media, and so on—that obey conventional codes for style and function. Much of this material culture hails our attention without resorting to language—and therefore it rarely calls attention to itself. It is therefore easy to take the physical character of things for granted, and space itself "is seen simply as a location where people do things" (O'Toole & Were, 2008, p. 616). This quality is what Miller (2008) refers to as "the humility of things"—the notion that "objects are important not at all because they are explicit and visible, but because they act as the frame of interaction and behaviour that we rarely look at directly but which help determine, often unconsciously, our categorization and appraisal of our circumstances" (p. 277). In other words, overfamiliarity with the concrete elements of a scene tends to breed under-sensitivity to their presence and rhetorical effects.

As a result of this "humility," material culture operates on us by subterfuge, by evoking our memory of the discourses and cultural associations that have built up around it over time. It is this *inconspicuous* quality that becomes, as McCracken (1988) notes, "an unusually cunning and oblique

device for the representation of fundamental cultural truths. It allows culture to insinuate its beliefs and assumptions into the very fabric of daily life, there to be appreciated but not observed. It has to this extent great propagandistic value in the creation of a world of meaning. Furthermore, the inconspicuousness of the messages of material culture also permit them to carry meaning that could not be put more explicitly without the danger of controversy, protest, or refusal" (pp. 68–69). An example of this point is the spread of television screens in public space (McCarthy, 2001), a phenomenon which "asserts"—without, of course, saying so in words—that people are willing to tolerate, even enjoy, this artifact's intrusive, distractible, advertising-driven presence at times and places not of their choosing.

Third, people often engage with an object in terms of its fitness for a particular project. This notion is well expressed in Gibson's (1977) psychological theory of affordances. According to this theory, an object has built into its design a range of "action possibilities," which affords certain kinds of interactions with capable human actors (while also limiting or foreclosing other possibilities). For example, when I look for a pen to sign my name to a document, I interact with this object in terms of its suitability for the purpose at hand, as well as the tactile qualities of grip, surface finish, and feel as its point moves across paper. An image of the object rises to consciousness at the moment I need it, and my use of the actual object aligns with its ostensible purpose and how effectively it enables me to begin, continue, and complete the action of writing. What I am *not* thinking of is why I chose a pen instead of a thick piece of chalk—because the latter does not include writing on paper as one of its action possibilities. I may also be interested in the pen's evocative qualities, asking (consciously or not), what does this pen afford by way of a favorable social interaction? This extends the concept of affordance from perceptual psychology into the realm of social analysis. In place of the design adage, "form follows function," we might say of our object-related interactions, "form follows intention."

Material items do become explicit and visible in their own right when they malfunction, go missing, are singled out in conversation, or become problematic in social relationships. Such moments can become, for researchers, an opportune time for peering under the veil of normalcy. A variety of interviewing tactics can also be used to aid people in "waking up" to what they know and feel tacitly about their surroundings or to open up the more symbolic (rather than purely functional) aspects of an object's placement and usage in a scene. Some of these strategies were discussed in Chapter 6. In addition, participant observers, as we learned in Chapter 5, pay close attention to the spaces, objects, and tools in a scene—especially in the initial days of fieldwork. For example, in their investigation of the R & D department of an Australian

technology company, O'Toole and Were (2008) found that "people often had only a vague or no idea why they displayed certain objects" (p. 626). One area of special interest was the receptionist's desk, a setting that functioned as the portal to the company's "back office" functions. The authors focused on the material means by which Jenny, the receptionist, created a refuge of personal power and autonomy in this very public setting:

Although to the visitor, the reception desk was professional and uncluttered, walking around the desk to Jenny's space showed a different picture. Jenny displayed a great deal of bric-a-brac as well as some photographs of her dog and her partner in what seemed a cluttered and haphazard way. When I asked about the objects, she laughed and shook her head. She said that "it had just happened that way."

Although she couldn't tell them much about how the objects got onto her desk, the authors concluded that the presence of these personal items (as well as their "cluttered and haphazard" arrangement) constituted a small but important way for Jenny to cope with the diminished physical privacy that went with her low-status job.

The first step in making material culture visible for analysis is identifying one or more objects for study. One common strategy is to choose an object with strong symbolic value in a particular context. "Even the most mundane object," writes Leeds-Hurwitz (1993, p. 138), "can be used as a way in to a system of meaning." Some places and objects—such as media devices, signage, art, etc.—are "designed specifically to be communicative and representational" (Hodder, 2000, p. 706). Other objects may already be "embedded in a set of practices and evocation—through networking, interconnection, and mutual implication of materials and non-materials" (p. 708), such as clothing, food, tools, furniture, and personal items.

Essentially, one executes the strategy by developing thick descriptions of an object's physical and semiotic qualities, then working "outwardly" toward larger contexts of historical, cultural, or interpersonal significance. The analyst should try to capture all relevant details of the artifact through observations, photographs, video, and/or recorded interviews. This description may include the primary sensory qualities of sight (color, brightness, etc.), touch (texture, softness, etc.), smell, sound, and taste, as well as other characteristics of size, weight, dimensions, portability, modularity, method of assembly, public visibility, packaging, and so forth (Tilley, 2001). The range of distinctions is practically endless, but some are more salient than others for conveying meaning and orienting the behavior of people in the scene.

Alternately, a material culture study can be carried out through a different selection strategy. This strategy begins with the researcher's discovery of

a scene that possesses rich possibilities for studying material culture. Following a period of time devoted to understanding this scene, the researcher works "inwardly" to identify artifacts for intensive study. For example, Girardelli (2004) decided to study how ethnic connotations of "Italian style" are commodified in the U.S. fast-food industry. Girardelli identified the Fazoli's restaurant chain as his primary site and immersed himself in its institutional, media, and local-franchise contexts:

I conducted background research to better understand Fazoli's overall business concept, market position, and communication strategy. I collected and analyzed promotional materials (on-site pamphlets, television ads, radio commercials, and the Fazoli's web site) and articles published in specialized magazines (such as *Nation's Restaurant News*, *Progressive Grocer*, and *Chain Leader*) dedicated to Fazoli's. I also visited the selected Fazoli's franchise 10 times (5 times alone and 5 times with two other colleagues), taking notes and pictures of the environment. (p. 314)

Girardelli's consideration of all of these materials eventually led him to focus on the verbal strategies in Fazoli's menus, signage, and promotions (e.g., expressions associated with Italian culture, such as "family," "authentic," and "capische"), the nonverbal strategies inferred from the restaurant environment (organized in terms of seven themes, such as the rustic theme, the old-world theme, and the kitchen/bistro theme), and the social and ideological codes employed in the company's "Everyone is Italian!" television advertising campaign.

As this example suggests, the boundaries of an object and its context are not always well marked in a physical sense. Indeed, Hodder (2000) warns, "The boundaries of the context are never 'given'; they have to be interpreted. . . . The notion of context is always relevant when different sets of data are being compared and where a primary question is whether the different examples are comparable, whether the apparent similarities are real" (p. 711). It is not unusual for material items to circulate far afield from their point of origin; it then becomes important to track the reinterpretations of the object as it crosses into each new context.

Objects, of course, do not evoke meanings in isolation. An object evokes meaning only in its relation to the meanings of other objects. This semiotic principle has clear implications for the method of material culture analysis. At the same time you have identified an object for study, you should begin to evaluate its similarities and differences in relation to objects in the same (or adjoining) context. These similarities and differences arise from comparing the objects' physical features in their customary contexts as well as from comparing the discursive references to these objects in conversations, speeches,

textual materials, advertising, and so forth. This analytic move is important for three reasons. First, it helps you to “problematize the physical” (O’Toole & Were, 2008, p. 620). That is, it sensitizes you to those features of an object that elicit the most powerful or prominent meanings. Second, you will be on firmer ground arguing for the boundaries of a particular context if it is shown that “people respond similarly to similar situations [or objects], within its boundaries” (Hodder, 2000, p. 711). Third, by looking methodically at evidence of the similarities and differences of your focal object with objects of the same general category, as well as with objects of different categories or in adjoining contexts, you start to develop interpretations grounded in multiple levels of meaning. As Musello (1992) notes about this process, “Analysis must be prepared, in effect, to move readily between levels of integration—shifting back and forth between the visible, material traits of the thing itself; the verbal mediations that accompany the object; and the more complex organizations of activity into which the object is integrated” (p. 55).

To illustrate this method, we turn to Chronis and Hampton’s (2008) ethnography of the tourist experience at the Gettysburg Civil War battlefield, which the authors studied as an exemplar of the problematic nature of “authenticity” of heritage sites. In addition to doing extensive participant and nonparticipant observation at the Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, site, the authors interviewed 78 visitors who were “asked to comment on both their experiential consumption benefits and on those aspects of the site that they found particularly involving, captivating, significant, or characteristic of the historical events” (p. 115). Among the several constructs of authenticity (factual, personage, locational, and contextual) emerging from analysis of their fieldwork data was *object-related authenticity*. This mode of interpretation is concerned with the issue of credibility, and it featured prominently in the visitors’ comments about the museum pieces and the carriages, buildings, weaponry, and other artifacts they encountered in touring the open spaces of the park. Chronis and Hampton (2008) explain:

[We observed] a number of visitors who would base their assessment on certain authentication marks like the date embossed on many (but not all) of the cannons located on the battlefield: “They have the dates on them. Yes, they were original.” Interestingly enough, the same authentication marks were used as signs to challenge certain cannons’ authenticity. Such was the case on Little Round Top, where a number of cannons are placed next to each other. While they all looked old, one of them had the year 1864 imprinted on the barrel, indicating that it was not there during the battle:

I: How do you know that these were the cannons that they fought with?

R: Some of them could be, but the particular one, no. It was *manufactured in 1864*.

Thus, authentication of various artifacts is not simply bestowed by the management and easily accepted by visitors. . . . As a large number of our informants manifested, their existing historical knowledge—like the year the battle was fought—functions as a riddle that filters the site’s historical representation. (p. 116; emphasis in original)

This excerpt underscores a key point about the use of material culture in qualitative studies: evidence of (dis)similarity in the physical character of objects is ultimately of analytic interest only if it matters to the cultural membership, as indicated in their actions and discourse. Many of the visitors did accept the Gettysburg objects as “*original, correct, or authentic*, meaning that they were the ones that were present during the battle of 1863” (p. 115; italics in original). Other visitors looked closely at the same objects and discerned a critical difference that cast doubt on their authenticity. The “news” here is not so much about the objects themselves as the fact that the visitors engaged with the objects in a quest for “the authenticity of the tangible remnants of the past” (p. 116). The incongruity of a date imprinted on a cannon mattered to those visitors who brought a specific set of knowledge to bear on the task of interpreting the site’s objects. This finding added a meaningful dimension to the construct of object-related authenticity.

So far we have discussed ways of making material culture visible as an element “in” communication. The first steps involve making a justified identification of objects for study, then engaging in cross-comparisons of the physical and semiotic characteristics of an object vis-a-vis other objects and the local discourses of social actors. (Of course, we need to remember that this isn’t always the order in which the analysis is done. We may already be studying a setting, and only after listening to people do we realize that one or more objects of their material culture are so important that they demand a focused study.) Next, the analyst aims to expand these interpretations within larger frameworks of history, ideology, biography, and/or theory. The goal of this step is to develop a deeper, multidimensional understanding of the material culture. The specific choice of frameworks to apply depends partly on the nature of the place or objects being studied and partly on the interests brought to the study by the researcher. It may also be partly the result of ongoing encounters with the research literature and other works. In any case, as Hodder (2000) advises, “The more richly networked the associations that can be followed by the interpreter, and the thicker the description . . . that can be produced, the subtler the interpretations that can be made” (p. 711).

Simpson’s (2000) interpretive ethnography of an urban youth scene in Tampa, Florida, provides many examples of this analytic move. From the

opening page, we are thrust into the chaotic tableau of the Ybor City historical district on a Saturday night—"loud music blaring from a succession of barfront facades and street musicians and . . . sidewalk merchants whose carts and stands display boiled peanuts, handmade jewelry, hot dogs, candles, candy bars, T-shirts, fried-egg sandwiches, reggae hats, cappuccino, cologne, barbecued chicken, and a preponderance of drug-smoking paraphernalia" (p. 675). Simpson's tour of this urban bacchanalia continues to snake cinematically through the crowds thronging the streets until he pauses, on the article's third page, to reflect on "narrative space" as a master theme for understanding Ybor City's historical trajectory as well as for organizing the vivid portraits of street life generated from three years of fieldwork. We soon learn that the focal character of this ethnography is a local record store, Blue Chair. An oasis of "alternative" lifestyle and sensibility, Blue Chair welcomes the teenagers who are otherwise *persona non grata* in Ybor City's commercial establishments and offers them a gathering spot, racks of CDs, a live performance venue, and an array of distinctive spaces and objects that challenge the gentrification and restoration efforts underway in the historical district.

Simpson develops the theme of contested "narrative space" through sharply observed vignettes of Blue Chair's clientele and material culture scene. One noteworthy aspect of this scene is Blue Chair's display window:

As I walk down Seventh Avenue, I pass windows exhibiting products for sale—clothes, furniture, art, even cigars. But walking past Blue Chair gives me reason to pause. Displayed in the window are not products but people. Four old padded chairs sit in the window and are occupied by people talking. Two of the people are hunched over a chessboard perched on a table between two of the chairs. Other times, I have observed the owners of the store sitting in the window, counting their stock, taking what would normally be a backstage activity and moving it to the front stage. . . . I have seen customers lounging in the window reading magazines. Finally, bands play in the store on nights when the window becomes a stage. (p. 698)

Citing Richard Schechner (1983), Simpson calls attention to the deliberate blurring of lines between art and life signified by the display window. Then, summoning one of Hebdige's (1988) studies of subculture style, Simpson suggests that the idea of display itself has become an object of fascination. From the popular, baggy "clubwear" worn by 1990s-era youth, to the then nascent Ybor City tattoo and body piercing businesses, everyone seems to know they are on display—even if no one is looking. Blue Chair, he concludes, uses its unusual window displays not just to perform the "alternative" ethos, but also to comment on society's captivation with self-display.

Documents

The study of documents—symbolic texts that can be retrieved for analysis (Altheide, 1996)—can be very useful in qualitative research, and you should always be on the lookout for them in the predictable places of a cultural scene. There are times, however, when a document lands in one's path, unbidden and unannounced. This happened to Tom a few years ago, when an e-mail from Eileen Drust—then a doctoral student at the University of Kentucky, who was assisting him in the study of political advance teams—appeared in his in-box. An informant whom she just interviewed had sent her a copy of an "advance manual" from the 2004 presidential race. Sure enough, Eileen's e-mail had a document attachment with the filename *KerryAdvanceManual.doc*. Tom had heard of these manuals. They are the internal publications of a campaign (or of an organizational unit, such as the White House Office of Advance) that specify the proper ways to conduct advance. As yet, though, he had not seen one.

Tom is an unapologetic old-school type who enjoys the feel, look, and heft of paper documents, so the first thing he did (after saving the file to his hard drive) was to print out the manual. He flipped past the smiling, confident visage of John Kerry on the cover and began poring over the 52 pages of single-spaced text. He soon realized that this manual—and probably all such advance manuals—is actually a blend of several types of books. First, an advance manual is a *codebook*. A wealth of jargon has grown up around advance practices across the decades of campaigns, and the manual serves the purpose of introducing and defining this terminology for the novice. (On page 47 of the manual, we learn that a "union bug" is "the symbol of a union product." The reader is advised to "make certain that all of your printed materials are done at a union printer and include a union bug.") Second, the manual functions as a *cookbook*, setting forth "recipes" of accepted rules, techniques, and procedures for executing political events. There is apparently nothing too obscure or obvious to be described in exacting detail. (This appeared on page 21: "You *must* have a sign language interpreter at all events with an audience of over 200 people. Be sure that the interpreter is dressed professionally and situated on the stage where she or he can be easily seen by the audience . . . Be sure, however, to avoid placing the interpreter where she blocks the cutaway shot.") Third, the manual presents itself as an authoritative text that "teaches" the best practices of advance—a *textbook*. (On page 10, we read, "You are invisible to the camera. Your work is done just outside the four corners of the picture frame. You do not eat up an inch of the screen that is the canvas that you and your colleagues have designed to be the 'picture of the day.'")

But that wasn't all. The manual also functions—for lack of a better term—as a *holy book*. That is, it includes passages that justify the duty of advance people, motivate them to do good work, and instruct them as to their place in the political universe. This purpose first comes into focus on the second page of the Kerry manual, left blank except for this paragraph:

This manual is comprised of materials from the advance manuals for Democratic Presidential candidates Kennedy '60; McCarthy '68; Humphrey '68 & '72; McGovern '72; Carter/Mondale '80; Mondale/Ferraro '84; Dukakis/Bentsen '88; Clinton '92; Gore/Lieberman '00; and the thoughts and multitudes of advance people past and present. There is no copyright.

This sense of an unbroken (and unselfish) chain of service carries over into the foreword. At the top of the page is a quote from Theodore H. White's classic book, *The Making of the President, 1960*, in which White salutes advance people as "practitioners of one of the most complicated skills in American politics." Below this quote, the manual resumes its voice:

These pages summarize the experience of unnamed, but talented advance people who have staffed numerous campaigns and coordinated innumerable events. They can help you avoid past errors and repeat past successes. It is intended to guide you in organizing the mechanics of a visit rapidly so that you can focus your mind on your most important task: organizing the politics of the visit.

One quality of a good advance person is to be a stickler for relevant details. This manual is designed to help you make sure that the hundreds of details required by every visit are executed by the appropriate person at the appropriate time, and in the appropriate way. Treat the information in this advance manual as rules of thumb. Use your imagination and good judgment and apply them to each new local situation but always stand ready to explain your decisions. GOOD LUCK!

Again, we see the manual gesturing toward its provenance: the names of one's forebears may never be known, but the fruit of their excellent (as well as flawed) work lives on in these pages. Readers are urged to use this collected wisdom to "avoid past errors" and thereby become a good advance person. Who is a good advance person? He or she is someone who is in command of all of the relevant details of an event—literally hundreds of them—and who sees that they are handled with due diligence by "the appropriate person at the appropriate time." However, there exists a more important task of advance: "organizing the politics of the visit." It's not yet clear whether the manual will prepare its readers for that task, in which each new

situation requires a deft use of native talent ("your imagination and good judgment"), but one thing *is* clear: all advance people are accountable for the decisions they make (and by inference, there are no lone rangers, loose cannons, or radical iconoclasts in the advance world).

In the last two words ("GOOD LUCK"), Tom could almost hear the reader thinking to him- or herself, "There is a lot to learn, and I'm still not quite sure I know what I am getting into, but at least this manual makes me feel like I'm not alone."

The Kerry advance manual wasn't the project's Rosetta stone, decoding once and for all the arcane knowledge of advance work. Rather, this manual, like any document, is understood in part within the ambit of its purposes. Because the manual so clearly identified these purposes in relation to an ideal reader (a novice advance worker), it helped Tom imaginatively project this reader's possible response as well as grasp the communicative burdens of the text itself. The manual is also understood within the ambit of the practices that constitute advance work. It is a classical field manual, meant to be read and reread in an action context. In this respect, it was a veritable treasure trove of information about advance operations and later became a vital resource when Tom interviewed the Kerry campaign's director of advance. Familiarization with the manual gave him a "leg up" in framing sensible questions about the training and socialization of new advance workers—a line of inquiry that revealed how the advance manual came to be written, as well as some limitations of the manual as it is actually used in campaigns.

Documents in Qualitative Research

As this example illustrates, documentary materials can be a vital source of field data. There is no getting around the fact that documents are deeply embedded in people's work and leisure worlds—as prompts to action, as informational resources, as aids in speech acts, as items of transaction, and so on. It is a rare circumstance, indeed, in which texts of some sort do not play a role in informing action. Even communicative phenomena that might seem to rely solely on speech—such as mobile phones as a "transitional object" in parent-teenager relationships (Ribak, 2009)—often involve usage of one or more documents (such as a phone billing statement). Later in this chapter, we will discuss some of the methodological opportunities that document analysis offers. Here, we review four uses of documents in qualitative communication research, accompanied by exemplars from the literature. This list does not exhaust all of the uses that can be made of documents, but they are suggestive of some major applications in fieldwork.

First, it is often useful to study the “career” of a document. Because documents are handled, notated, and acted upon by different people, this strategy can lead to insights about the ways in which documents help coordinate interpretations and behavior. For example, Osterlund (2008) engaged in a 15-month ethnography of the practices for documenting patients’ health care in a teaching hospital. Osterlund found that particular documents (especially the Senior Notes and House Officer Sign Out notes) function as “portable places,” in the sense that they are employed by interns, senior residents, medical students, and attending physicians to “demarcate places for communication and collaboration” (p. 201). In this analysis, “portable place” acts as a powerful metaphor for describing the role of documents in managing the health care itineraries of patients.

Second, official documents are a site of claims to power, legitimacy, and reality. Organizational decisions must be “documented” in some fashion, and the path to an approved document can be tortuous, conflicted, and/or fraught with serious consequences for all of the stakeholders. It is important, Miller (1997) points out, to study these texts in relation to “the institutional settings in which they are constructed, interpreted, and used. Such research emphasizes the spatial, temporal, and practical contingencies associated with the texts” (p. 78). For example, Thackaberry (2004) examined an organizational self-study undertaken by the U.S. Forest Service in order to improve the “culture” of fire safety. As Thackaberry found in tracking successive reports, the discourse of recommended fire orders shifted decisively from a new vision of local decision making by firefighters (“orders are guidelines”) to one that articulated an inflexible top-down approach (“orders are orders”). She concluded that management’s need for control led to a strategic expression of “discursive closure” in the self-study process.

Third, communication events are encoded and preserved as documents. Some of these documents are after-the-fact reconstructions by an eyewitness (e.g., minutes of a meeting), others are impressionistic, first-person accounts written in real time (e.g., an instant message or “tweet”), and still others are representations of actual voices and conversations (e.g., the Congressional Record, chat room dialogue, postings to online forums). For example, as part of an effort to understand the dynamics of fan activism, Menon (2007) studied the postings to Internet message boards dedicated to an ABC television program imperiled by low ratings, *Once and Again*. Approximately 13,000 messages were collected from numerous websites, which were subsequently analyzed along with data from face-to-face interviews and e-mail communications. Notably, Menon argued that “the postings are a vital expression of the O & A fans’ and activists’

expression of community, and the discourse conveyed in the postings can tell us a great deal about how mediated communities are socially constructed” (p. 366).

Finally, a great many organizations and groups create “documents” of some sort for public consumption—from a company website to listings on craigslist.com to national TV programming; their relevance and value as data ultimately depend on the researcher’s purposes. For example, West’s (2008) study of the greeting card industry and its strategy of “universal specificity” called for detailed analysis of such public texts as greeting card copy and the Hallmark website. Durington’s (2007) ethnography of a “sub-urban moral panic” required a different approach. The Plano, Texas, teenage heroin overdose panic at the center of his study originated with a full-page article published in the October 5, 1997, edition of the *Dallas Morning News*. Naturally, this document took on a role of major importance in Durington’s study.

Types of Documents

Although “document” is often an omnibus term, covering the wide range of symbolic texts generated and consumed by cultural memberships, some methodologists make key distinctions within that broad field. Madge (1965), for example, distinguishes between *primary* and *secondary* sources. Primary sources, “which comprise the testimony of eyewitnesses of the events described” (p. 89), are usually preferred when the facts of an event need to be established. For other uses, secondary sources, which are based on indirect (or hearsay) evidence—such as media stories about an event or the expressed opinions of social actors who are affected by, but not directly involved in, an event—may be exactly the kind of data one needs.

The distinction of *records* and *personal documents* is another way to categorize textual materials (Hodder, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Madge, 1965). A record is defined as “any written or recorded statement prepared by or for an individual or organization for the purpose of *attesting to an event or providing an accounting*” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 277; emphasis in original). Records are designed to “capture” a wide array of events and activities, including the following:

- the certification of an act (e.g., a marriage license, a bill of sale)
- the enumeration of a membership (e.g., a roster, a phone book, a listserv)
- the codification of procedures and policies (e.g., a manual, a syllabus, a recipe)

- the routine formatting for an individual or group performance (e.g., an exam, a job application, a questionnaire)
- the reporting of performance results (e.g., a shareholder report, a baseball box score, a college transcript)
- the historical accounting of an organization or person (e.g., a yearbook, a bio sketch)
- the rendering of an event (e.g., the minutes of a meeting, an interview transcript)

Personal documents, on the other hand, are “any written or recorded material *other than a record* that was not prepared specifically in response to a request from the inquirer (such as a test or a set of interview notes)” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 277; emphasis in original). Madge (1965) defines a personal document in more positive terms as “a spontaneous first-person description by an individual of his [*sic*] own actions, experiences, and beliefs” (p. 77). Judging from the range of texts under the rubric of personal documents—diary entries, letters, speeches, blogs, social network profiles, movie screenplays—it is evident that not all of them are produced “spontaneously.” Nevertheless, it is fair to say that personal documents are much less constrained by organizational demands and requirements than are records, and thus they can be read as genres of self-expression. As such, they provide insights into people’s beliefs, identities, relationships, and communicative styles (e.g., Banks, Louie, & Einerson, 2000; Otnes, Kim, & Kim, 1994).

Other ways of categorizing documents include objective versus subjective, solicited versus unsolicited, edited versus completed, and so forth. With any forced dichotomy of human artifacts, however, there are going to be complexities, contradictions, and exceptions. A text considered “primary” in one context (a deposition in a court case) could be a “secondary” source in another context (the rumors reported by the witness in a deposition). Some artifacts contain both records and personal documents (e.g., a newspaper that publishes obituaries as well as op-ed columns), and the line between a record and a personal document can be very fine (e.g., lecture notes). The purity or mutual exclusivity of categories is less important than whether they are useful for finding documents and thinking about their purposes in a cultural scene.

Advantages of Document Analysis

Informational richness. Compared to other qualitative research techniques, such as observation and interviewing, the study of documents possesses a number of general advantages. First, documents are often *rich sources* of

information—“contextually relevant and grounded in the contexts they represent” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 277). This is especially true if a sizable number of documents are gathered and analyzed. In Tom’s study of Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*, for example, he was given access to a large deposit of material dating from the late 1970s onward that had to do with the origins of the film project: option agreements, screenwriter and director contracts, attorneys’ letters, and so on. The sheer size, scope, and detail of this material far surpassed anything that could be gleaned from the recollections of his interview subjects. Even the 52-page advance manual yielded far more information about advance practices than any single interview that Tom conducted. Richness of documents derives not only from the *amount* of information, but also the quality. That is, they are richly infused with the history, idiomatic speech, and cultural logics of the people who made them.

Availability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) note that documents are “almost always *available*, on a low-cost (mostly investigator time) or free basis” (p. 276; emphasis in original). Entry into a scene is often accompanied by the chance to examine an individual’s or group’s “paper trail.” You don’t usually need to go far to encounter this trail. Many people keep their important documents close at hand or know where they can be found. If the person is of a generous spirit, you may be allowed to use the documents at little or no cost. Most institutional archives also adhere to a policy of free access to, and usage of, their collections. There may be occasions, however, when it is necessary to expend time and money in locating documents, or traveling to the physical archives where they are housed.

The epochal transition from stand-alone, analogical media to networked, digital media has had a major impact on the world of documents. Materials that were once created only in “hard copy” form and moved through physical delivery channels now exist almost entirely in digital formats that flow seamlessly across a variety of Internet-enabled platforms. Commercial publications such as journals, magazines, and newspapers that once had short shelf lives on newsstands are now archived on a company’s website or can be accessed via online databases such as Lexis-Nexis and EbscoHost. Moreover, many academic and commercial organizations have begun to digitally scan books that were formerly available in print-only editions and make them available online. Google Books is one of the most ambitious of these efforts. Much the same shift has occurred for photography, film, and video. Where once researchers had to engage in an uncertain, time-consuming process of searching far-flung audio-visual

archives (Godfrey, 2002), they now use sophisticated multimedia tools to do these searches more quickly and with arguably greater precision (Hollink et al., 2009).

As a result of trends in the digitalization of information, the documents sought by qualitative researchers may be only a few “clicks” away, eliminating the vexing issues of document access and the transport of the documents (or the investigator) to and from physical sites. Computerized collections, however, are not totally free of problems. As Webb et al. (1966) pointed out more than four decades ago, with respect to physical archives, selective deposit and selective survival of texts are potential sources of bias. Similarly, online archives may be incomplete, difficult to search, or occasionally purged with little or no notice, especially if the items are perceived as having little value to the host organization.

Regardless of the format, the entity that controls access to documents may impose conditions on the researcher’s ability to obtain, photocopy, or quote from them. There may also be ethical or legal questions about how it can (or should) be used for research purposes. The fair-use provision of copyright law allows scholarly use of limited portions of a document without the necessity of obtaining permission. Some types of material—song lyrics, for example—are far more circumscribed in the amount of text that can be used. From an ethical standpoint, documents often contain the names and describe the actions of living individuals who have not consented to be part of a qualitative study. If the document has already been made public, disclosure is not usually a sensitive matter. For private documents, it is prudent to withhold personally identifying information. The main exceptions to this rule are when the private document is already available in a public archive; when the parties to the document (e.g., the author or the individuals named in the document) give their permission for its use; or when the named individuals are public figures.

When working with documents, researchers should try to gain access to the originals, but photocopies will suffice for most purposes. The same devotion to detail that the researcher gives fieldnotes should characterize the format and content of a document. The researcher should try to describe the document’s origins and history, who issued it, when and how it was circulated (or read), and how it was used in communicative action.

Nonreactivity. A third commonly cited advantage of documents is their *nonreactivity* (Webb et al, 1966, p. 53). Many documents come into being at the end of a lively social process or as a result of a deliberative and/or

creative thought process by an individual. The document may have gone through many iterations during its span of life and maybe even “morphed” into something very different from what it started out to be. For some research questions, it is important to track the path by which a document reached its final form. But in most cases, by the time the researcher has arrived on the scene, the document is a relatively inert, stable object (unless, like a *wiki* in the online world, it is designed to be a site of continuous, collaborative revision). This is a major advantage from the researcher’s point of view because the document’s physical integrity *endures unchanged* across time and space. The document has “hardened” into a form that makes it impervious to further human influence and allows it to be examined from any angle. Unaffected by the interests or presence of a researcher, the document is therefore considered to be a type of nonreactive data.

However, this should not be construed as a case of “immaculate reception.” Even when its physical integrity is unchanged, a document’s meanings may vary across times, places, and readers. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) observe, “what emanates from a documentary or records analysis still represents a kind of interaction, that between the sources and the analyzing investigator” (p. 277). Moreover, we should not forget that the documents of most interest to researchers are often ones that are the subject of controversy or competing interpretations long after they have been created. For those actors who are still explicating, debating, and arguing over a document, it is the furthest thing from being a dead object.

What if you occupy a field role that involves participation in the production of a document? Clearly, your relationship with the data (the document) in this instance is highly “reactive,” but this needn’t disqualify its use as research evidence, any more than your ongoing relationship with an informant rules out writing up fieldnotes from the conversations the two of you have. The document can still be analyzed, albeit with a heightened, self-reflexive attention to your role in creating it and any vested interests you have in its outcome.

Truth value. The fourth advantage of documents concerns their *truth value*. To the extent that the information contained in documents—especially the kind previously identified as records—is vetted for accuracy, is used as a reliable basis for organizational decisions and actions, and/or is validated (or audited) by internal or external authorities, we may regard it as a trustworthy source. Indeed, it is an overt (or implied) purpose of a great many documents to promote a truth claim. The advance manual, for example, was full of assertions about the way things are in the world of political events. There

was not a hint of disguised “fiction” in the manual, or even for that matter any suggestion that contested versions of the truth about advance work exist. Unless a problem with a document’s accuracy is noted, challenged, and repaired (e.g., a “correction” or “retraction” published in a newspaper)—or unless, for undoubtedly interesting reasons, the users of a document are indifferent about its truth value—the information found therein is routinely regarded as trustworthy by those who produce and read it.

Documents of a more personal nature—blogs, letters, autobiographies, and so forth—can also be assessed for truth value. Here, we are mostly interested in how the content reflects the author’s perspective. Unless there is reason to think the author is being guarded, coy, or duplicitous, or is telling “half truths” about his or her beliefs or experience, the document can be safely regarded as accurately representing the author’s view of reality.

Of course, truth is a variable standard. Few, if any, documents are free of omitted facts, careless mistakes, deliberate falsehoods, or systemic kinds of distortion. Many organizations can live with a certain amount of inaccuracy—that is, a standard of *expedient* truth—in the production of texts, and they decide by edict, negotiation, or default just where that threshold lies. Academic departments in a university, for example, vary in the level of detail recorded in the minutes of their meetings. For one department, a summary of what was discussed is sufficiently “truthful”; another department will insist on granular detail, including quoted dialogue. Some organizations define truthfulness in terms of company policy, professional standards, or the expectations of their audiences; for example, “tabloid” and “mainstream” news outlets differ dramatically in the truth value of the accounts they publish.

Often, a document’s truth value changes (or emerges) as the document itself undergoes transformation. This edition of *Qualitative Communication Research Methods* has been revised by Tom and Bryan in both large and small ways from the second edition; as a result, the version you’re now reading makes slightly different truth claims about qualitative methodology than the one before it. To take a more everyday example, the sender of a forwarded e-mail often does a number of things to “reset” the conditions for reading the original’s truth claims. The sender may include some comments that act as preface for the original message, thus giving it a new contextualization. The sender may take it upon him or herself to operate upon the original message by cutting out parts of the body of the original message, inserting “editorial” remarks (maybe in a different color), or deleting the header information. Nowadays, digital media offer many capabilities for recalibrating any textual

or visual material (some of them of questionable legality)—from forwarded e-mails to music remixes and video mash-ups.

Ultimately, the evaluation of a document’s truthfulness depends on your analytic goal in using it. Is the document being read strictly for the factual information it contains? (If so, multiple forms of external evidence bearing on the accuracy of content may need to be applied.) Is the document being read as an account of how the authoring entity views itself? (To validate this evaluative reading, you may need to discuss it with the author or obtain other data about the author’s perceptions of the work.) Is the document being read to understand how the authoring entity wants to be viewed by others? (For this goal, it is helpful to know something about the author’s relationship to the audience for the document.) As a general rule, the more intimate knowledge you have of the culture or individual being studied, the more adept you will be at assessing the truth value of a document, as well as detecting (or otherwise accounting for) any deviations from the truth.

Conclusion

Material culture artifacts and documents are very important resources in establishing contexts for communication, orienting communicative action, creating emblems or expressions of ideas, distinguishing symbolic sites of value and power, and forging linkages to the past and the future. The strategies we discussed in this chapter have hopefully stimulated your thinking about how to use material culture and documents as data in your own research projects. The next chapter takes the process of qualitative research to the next stage: the analysis and interpretation of data.

Exercises

1. Online simulation sites like Second Life not only provide new “places” for fun and identity exploration, they offer a relatively unfettered zone for designing new models of living. However, as Bell (2009) observes, this freedom is not always used to fullest advantage: “While pretty much anything is possible in Second Life, architecturally, what is striking is the serial replication of the same types of built form, and the expressions of aspiration that builders there create: beachfront locations, familiar scales and layouts, recognizable houses. . . . Clearly, when given virtual freedom to express their creativity in architectural form, many Second Life residents do fall back on